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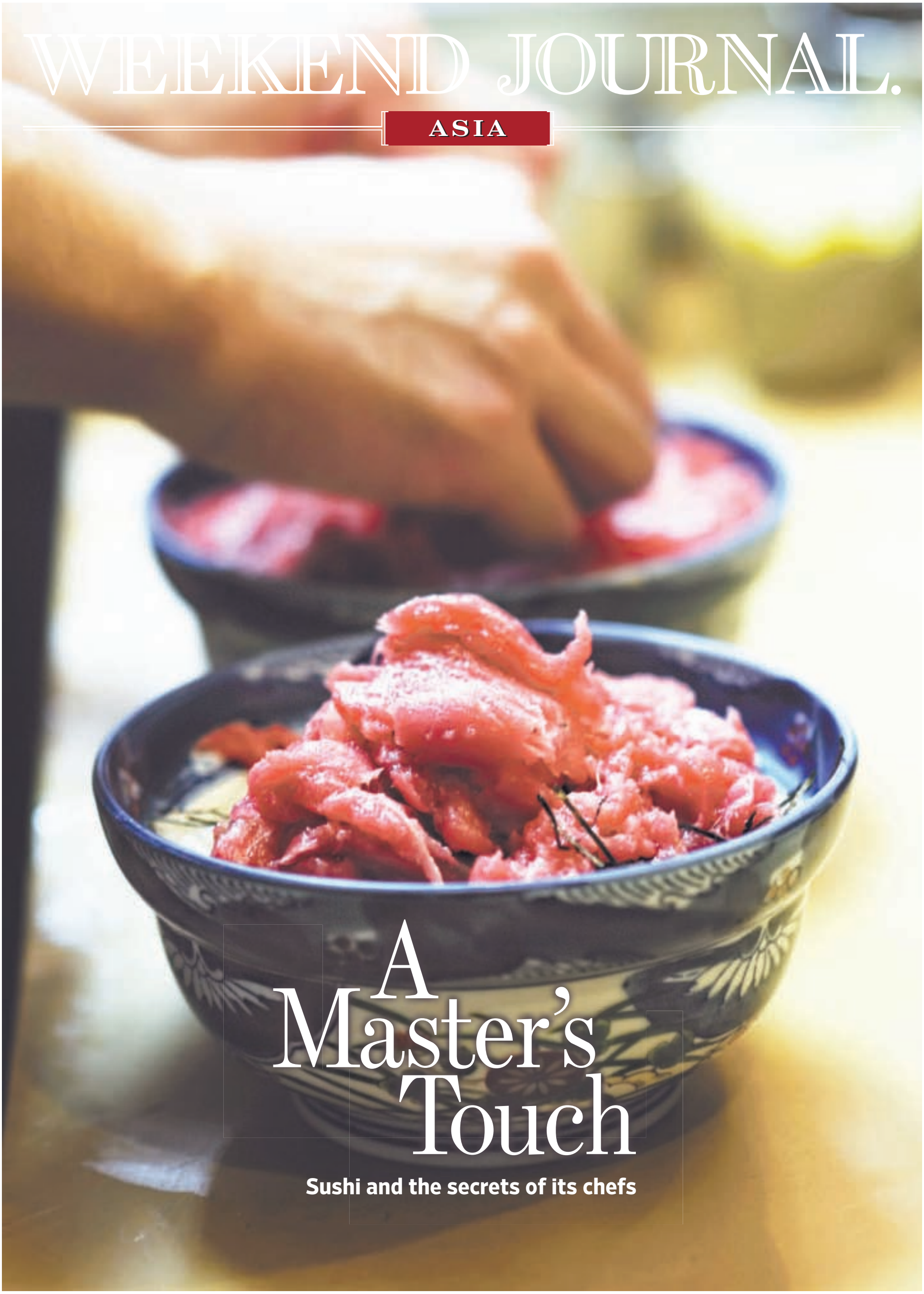

A Master's Touch

Sushi and the secrets of its chefs

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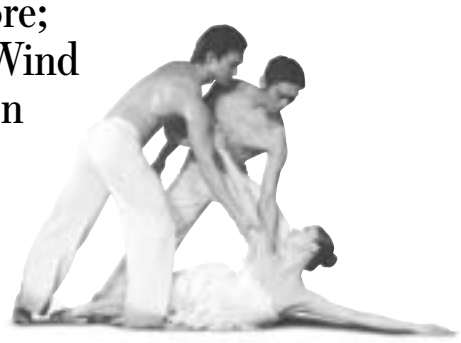

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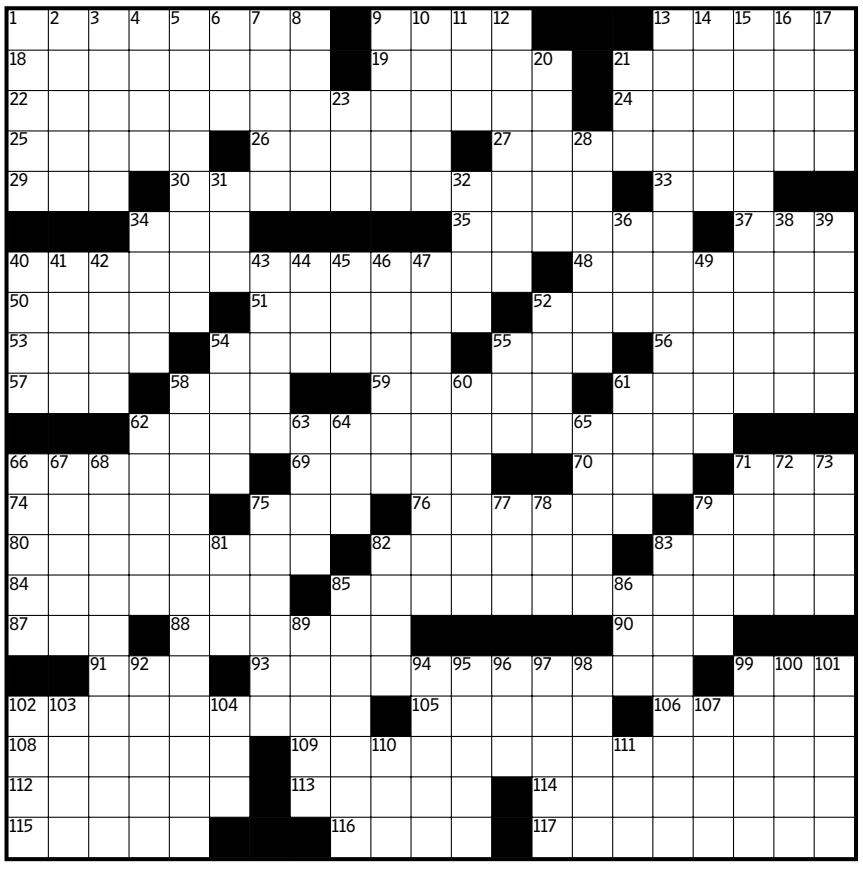

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110 Untested
111 Half a laugh

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Last week's solution

A	N	G	S	T	■	C	R	U	M	B	■	B	U	C	S	■	■	F	I	B
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Bamboo bamboozle

The fabric isn't as eco-friendly as you think

By Christina Binkley

Andreea Radutoiu (Viridis Luxe); Jeff Swensen (Jonäno); Bamboosa (Bamboosa)

Jonäno, left, and Viridis Luxe, designed by Hala Bahmet, above and right, are some brands making clothes with fabric derived from bamboo.

Slinky, soft bamboo fabric has made its way into my wardrobe in the form of a number of buttery shirts and dresses. When I came across the eco-label Viridis Luxe, it wasn't Uma Thurman's patronage of the brand that attracted me. It was the clothes' luxurious feel and comfortable styling.

Indeed, bamboo has had the most success among all the new "eco-textiles" on store shelves—fabric billed as environmentally friendly and made from materials such as soybeans, corn, milk, seaweed and recycled plastic. Bamboo shows up in clothes sold in high-end U.S. department stores, such as Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue, as well as sheets sold at discount retailer Target, and it bears such deluxe labels as Ermenegildo Zegna, Rag & Bone and Ralph Lauren, as well as more eco-focused brands. Because it is so exotically soft, bamboo often is marketed alongside luxury fibers such as silk and cashmere.

Bamboo's story sounds clear and appealing: like hemp, the plant grows quickly without the irrigation, pesticides or fertilizer often used to grow cotton. It's often sold as "biodegradable," and the plant's antimicrobial properties have been used to market athletic clothes made from the fiber. "People are switching from cotton to bamboo," says Aarti Doshi, regional manager for bamboo-fabric distributor Doshi Group, based in Mumbai.

When I looked below the surface, though, I found that bamboo fabric is less "eco" and "sustainable" than it seems. The bamboo used in textiles has to be heavily manipulated to go from stem to store. To create fabric, it's chopped up and dissolved in toxic solvents—the same process that recycles wood scraps into viscose or rayon. Indeed, bamboo fabric technically is rayon.

The U.S. Federal Trade Commission sued four small bamboo-clothing manufacturers in August, citing them for false labeling, among other concerns, under the 1958 Textile Fiber Products Identification Act. The companies had used language such as "natural," "biodegradable," and "antimicrobial." But bamboo fabric isn't natural, the FTC said, because it's a textile developed by chemists. The agency also said the biodegradable and antimicrobial qualities of the plant don't survive the manufacturing process. In a bulletin titled "Have You Been Bamboozled by Bamboo Fabrics?" the FTC said that bamboo fabrics "are made using toxic chemicals in a process that releases pollutants into the air."

The FTC's four cases are close to being settled without penalties, but with the requirement that fabric be labeled as viscose or rayon, and without the claims about biodegradability and antimicrobial properties, says FTC staff attorney Korin Ewing.

Of course, rayon doesn't have the same all-natural ring as bamboo. Salvatore Giardina, a designer and adjunct professor in textile development and marketing at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, says he works with hemp and linen but stopped using bamboo several years ago after a manufacturer told him it should be labeled as viscose. "I manufacture a very high-end product—there's no way I can put on my label '100% viscose,'" he says.

Bonnie Siefers, founder and designer of Jonano, one of the apparel makers sued by the FTC, says she has stopped marketing her bamboo line as biodegradable or antimicrobial. She is also working with newer fabrics made from corn sugars—which technically make something like polyester, minus the petroleum base.

But a quick search on the Web shows hundreds of apparel makers still market bamboo fabrics as eco-friendly. Ms. Ewing notes they probably have good intentions. "We have to be sure that sellers do their homework," she says. Most bamboo is grown in China, where it's harder for U.S designers to monitor suppliers.

Some wearers have other gripes. Mr. Giardina, the designer, says he found that bamboo fabric is unstable and likely to stretch out of shape in damp weather. Uniform Knitters, a Hong Kong apparel manufacturer, abandoned bamboo fabrics because they tend to shrink and have variances in color, according to a company spokeswoman.

My bamboo clothes also proved unstable. After a few washes, tiny holes began to appear in my new bamboo wardrobe. Hala Bahmet, the designer of Viridis Luxe, says the holes were the fault of too-thin yarn.

"Brands—us included—cranked out these delectable, lightweight, creamy garments that don't have the durability," she says. She now adds organic cotton to her clothes to improve durability, and she labels them "viscose from bamboo." She has had better success mixing hemp and cashmere in her sweaters.

Ms. Bahmet says she is optimistic that the FTC action will encourage scientists to research truly eco-friendly production methods for bamboo textiles. "Bamboo is just in its infancy as a fiber," she says. "It's not even a teenager yet."

Seamstresses at Bamboosa, which uses bamboo fabric for a variety of products.

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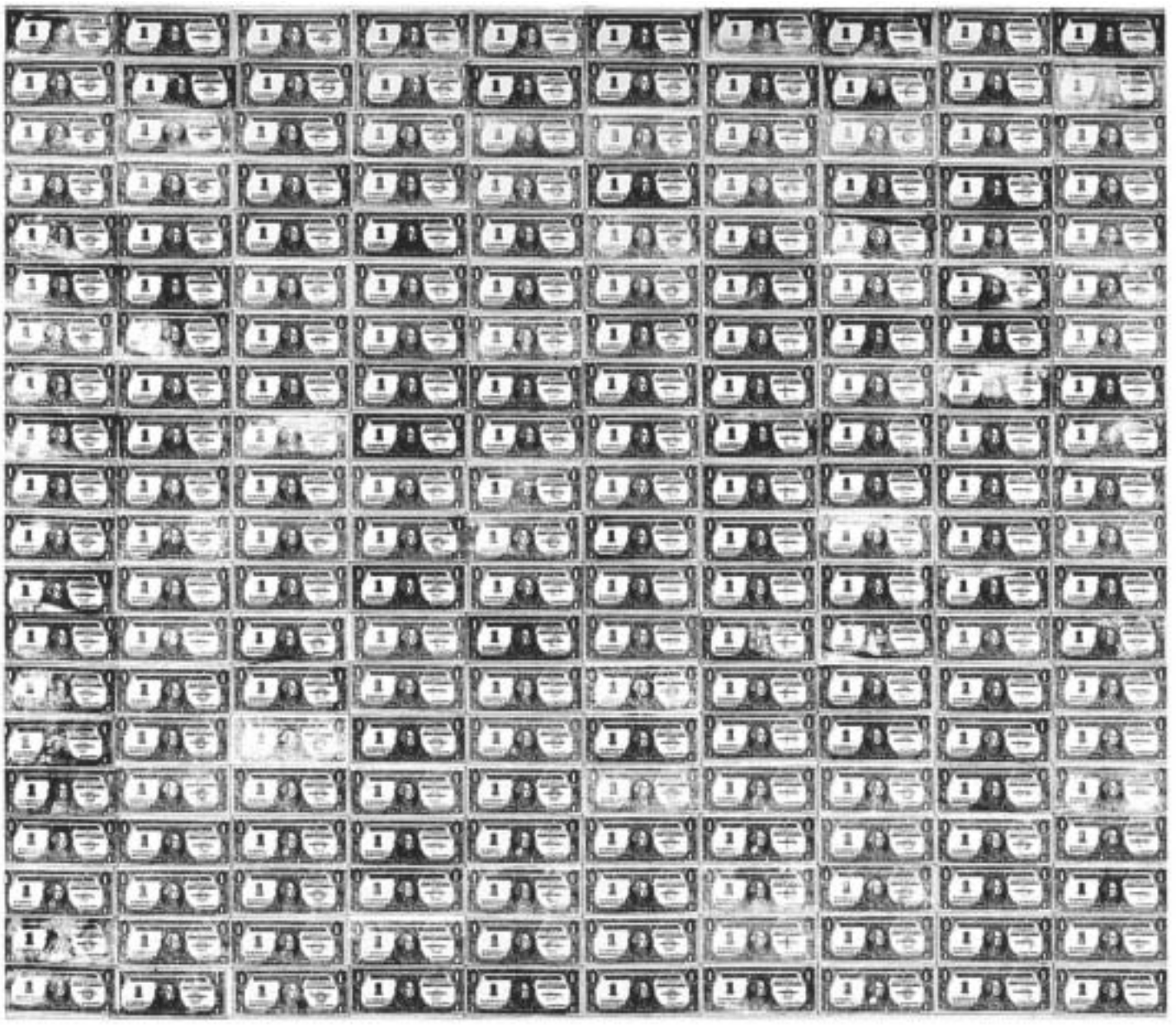
Brighter picture

Autumn sales in New York draw strong bids for some top works

By Kelly Crow



Sotheby's (Warhol, Derain, Dalí); Christie's (Rodin, Marden, Doig)

The U.S. art market appears to be on the mend. The major autumn auctions may not have sold everything on offer, but collectors showed a renewed willingness to bid up top examples of artists' work. Dealers also said inflation fears and expectations of higher bonuses in the financial markets stoked strong bidding.

New York's two chief auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's International, brought in about $596 million combined from their semiannual sales of Impressionist, modern and contemporary art earlier this month. The total surpassed the houses' $409 million spring sales in May, a gain that could signal a measure of returning confidence in high-end art values.

The mood among collectors grew increasingly upbeat as the two weeks of sales progressed. At Sotheby's contemporary art sale Nov. 11, a Warhol silkscreen sold for $43.7 million, more than triple its high estimate. At a lively sale of modern and Impressionist art the week before at Sotheby's, an Alberto Giacometti sculpture sold for $19.3 million, well over its $12 million high estimate.

At Christie's, the results were more modest. The house fell short of presale estimates at its Impressionist sale and modern-art evening sale Nov. 3, but it performed solidly at the Nov. 10 postwar and contemporary auction, led by a Peter Doig painting that sold for $10.1 million.

Despite the uptick, the market isn't likely to recapture its boom-era exuberance anytime soon. The volume of art changing hands at these sales is still much smaller than it was last November, when the two houses brought in a combined $729 million, or two years ago at the market's peak, when their autumn sales totaled $1.6 billion.

With help from the Warhol sale, Sotheby's won the latest series, selling $391.1 million and besting Christie's $205.7 million total. Smaller Phillips de Pury & Co. brought in $11.8 million with its two-day auction ending Nov. 13.

Here are a few lessons learned this time around.

■ Stars still aren't sure bets.

Art experts often gauge the health of the auction marketplace by tracking the priciest pieces. Although these sales enjoyed some unexpected hits, several star lots floundered. At Christie's, Jean-Michel Basquiat's "Brother Sausage" was estimated to sell for at least $9 million on Nov. 10, but bidding stalled at $7.5 million and it went unsold. A week earlier, Christie's failed to sell its ruby-red portrait of Pablo Picasso's wartime lover Dora Maar, "Tête de femme," which had been priced to sell for at least $7 million but got stuck around $6.4 million in the bidding.

Instead, the top price at Christie's went to Edgar Degas, whose 1896 peach-colored pastel of two ballerinas, "Danseuses," sold to a private Asian collector for $10.7 million, surpassing its $9 million high estimate. Christie's other big seller was Auguste Rodin's bronze sculpture of a couple intertwined in an embrace, "Le Baiser, moyen modèle dit 'Taille de la Porte.'" New York dealer Christopher Eykyn bought it for $6.3 million, three times its high estimate.

A few surprise works surged ahead at Sotheby's. André Derain's "Barques au Port de Collioure," a sun-dappled seascape painted with Fauve brushstrokes, sold to New York private dealer Guy Bennett on Nov. 4 for $14 million. Not only did that price top its $8 million high estimate, it also outshone one of the night's anticipated highlights—Picasso's "Buste d'Homme," which sold for $10.3 million but had been expected to bring up to $12 million.

The mixed fate of these big-ticket items suggests that collectors can still be persuaded to splurge, but only on masterpieces. One example: Andy Warhol's "200 One Dollar Bills," one of the artist's career-defining Pop pieces, depicting a wallpaper-like grid of greenbacks. The work carried high expectations—Sotheby's priced it to sell for up to $12 million—and it delivered, selling to a telephone bidder on Nov. 13 for $43.7 million, the second-highest price achieved for an artwork all year. (Christie's sold a $46.2 million Henri Matisse owned by Yves Saint Laurent in the spring.)

Final prices, unlike estimates, include the auction houses' fees, which are 25% on works under $50,000, 20% up to $1 million and 12% over $1 million.

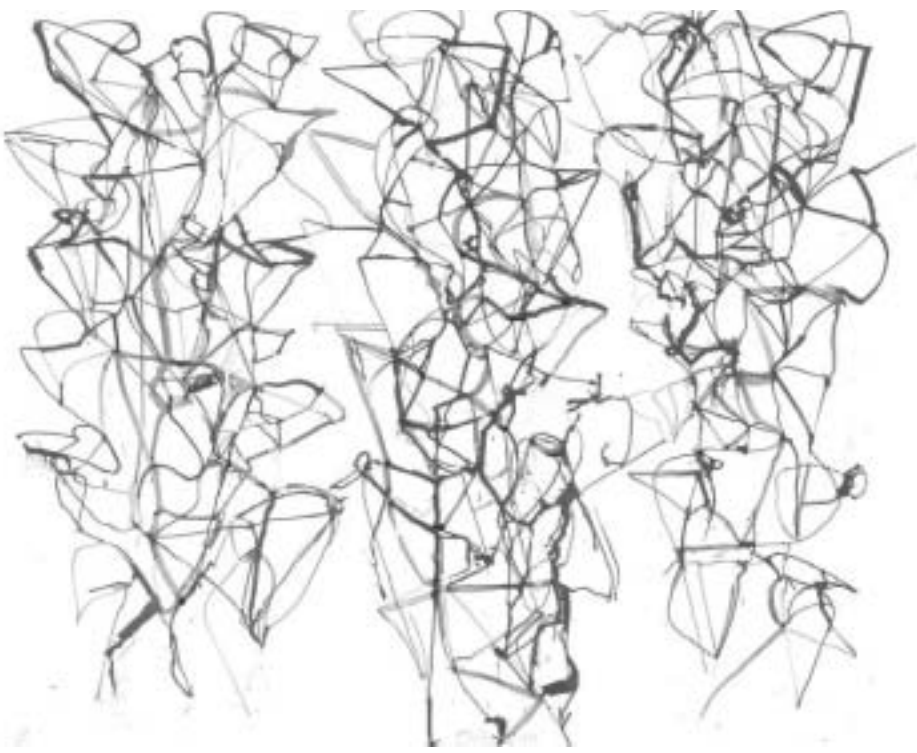
■ There's good value in drawings.

Collectors looking for smart buys during these sales often bypassed paintings in favor of lower-priced drawings by their favorite artists. Bidders may have been spooked by the $9 million price tag on the Basquiat painting at Christie's, but they pursued the artist's 1.5-meter-tall untitled drawing from 1982. The work, depicting a blue-faced man and painted in a faux-naive style, sold Nov. 10 for $3.1 million—exceeding its $2.8 million high estimate and achieving a record for a work on paper by the artist.

Christie's also broke the work-on-paper records for Philip Guston and Brice Marden. A spidery Marden abstract, "Untitled with Green," which carried a high estimate of $1.2 million, sold to an American collector bidding over the telephone for $2 million. At Sotheby's, records were similarly broken for works on paper by Salvador Dalí and Jackson Pollock.

On Nov. 4 at Sotheby's, London jeweler Laurence Graff paid $902,500 for a Picasso drawing of his mistress sitting in an armchair, "Femme Assise dans un Fauteuil." The work was priced to sell for up to $700,000.

Andy Warhol's '200 One Dollar Bills,' above, sold for $43.7 million at Sotheby's; Auguste Rodin's 'Le Baiser, moyen modèle dit 'Taille de la Porte,'' left, went for $6.3 million at Christie's.



Four works that came in well above their estimates: clockwise from right, Salvador Dalí's 'Girafe en Feu' (estimated at $150,000 to $200,000) sold for $1.9 million at Sotheby's; Brice Marden's 'Untitled With Green' ($900,000 to $1.2 million) sold for $2 million at Christie's; André Derain's 'Barques au Port de Collioure' ($6 million to $8 million) sold for $14 million at Sotheby's; Peter Doig's 'Reflection (What Does Your Soul Look Like)' ($4 million to $6 million) sold for $10.1 million at Christie's.

Mr. Graff said, "It's a bargain at these prices."

■ Flip at your own risk.

Before the recession, collectors and speculators routinely bought artworks and then resold them months later at a profit. Now, such attempts can backfire. Michael Moses, co-founder of the Mei Moses Fine Art Index, tracked returns on objects sold during these sales and found that pieces quickly returning to the auction block tended to resell at a loss.

Christie's Nov. 4 sale of Impressionist and modern works on paper included a 1949 Marc Chagall drawing of a woman overlooking a river, "La Seine a Villennes." The seller had paid $76,000 in June 2007, but got just $50,000 for it, a 15.6% negative compound annual return. In the same sale, a vivid watercolor of musicians by Raoul Dufy, "Le Concert Mexicain," sold for $104,500—37% less than the $166,572 it sold for at Christie's in London two summers ago. "The seller totally bit the bullet on that one," Mr. Moses said.

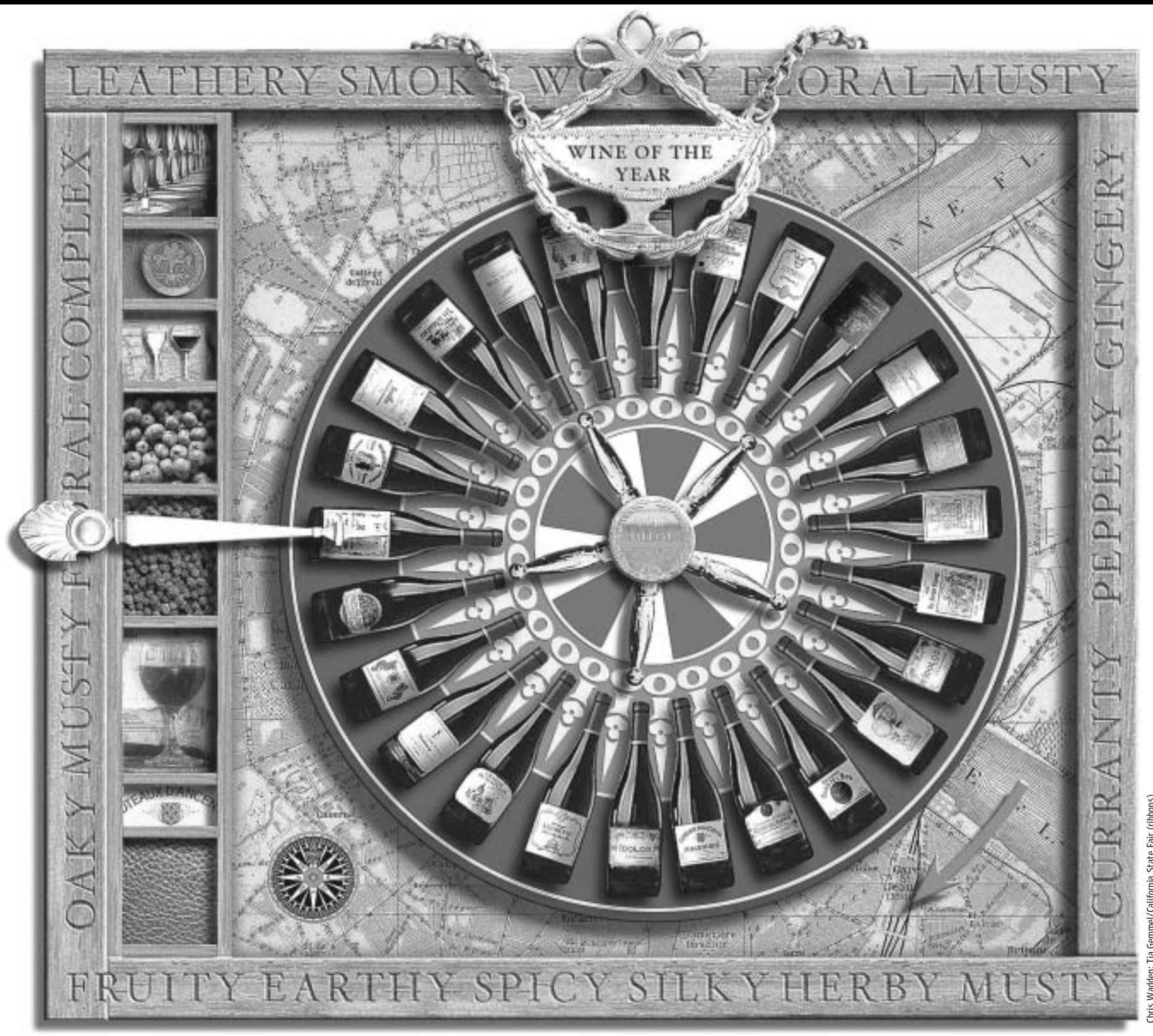
■ Guarantees are back.

For auction houses, these sales also marked the return of the guarantee, a financial mechanism in which an auction house promises to buy a work if it doesn't sell at auction. Guarantees offer potential sellers a risk-free reason to part with their best pieces, but Sotheby's and Christie's stopped offering deal-sweeteners after suffering an estimated $63 million combined loss from unsold guaranteed artworks last November.

Now, auction houses are gingerly stepping back into such deals, though they're mostly shifting the risk to third parties, typically dealers or collectors who agree to pay the seller a prearranged price for the work if it doesn't ultimately fetch a higher price at auction.

Sotheby's made a single deal this time around, for the seller of Picasso's 1949 portrait of his toddler son beside a toy horse, "Claude à Deux Ans." Sotheby's arranged for an outsider to place what it calls "an irrevocable bid" on the work, which means the bidder agreed to buy the piece for a guaranteed price or share a cut of any additional profits should another bidder offer more. In this case, the Picasso was guaranteed to sell for at least $5 million. The piece went for just over that at $5.5 million, or $6.2 million with fees. Sotheby's declined to say whether the third-party bidder won the work.

Christie's secured third-party guarantees for five works in its contemporary sale with a combined low estimate of $13.7 million, including works by Jeff Koons, Joan Mitchell, Basquiat and Marden. At the sale's outset, auctioneer Christopher Burge disclosed that the works' guarantors might also choose to bid on them during the sale, but the auction house later declined to say whether any stakeholders took home the works or were outbid. Either way, the move paid off for Christie's: The five works accounted for half the top 10 prices achieved during its contemporary sale, led by Mr. Koons's "Large Vase of Flowers," which sold for $5.6 million, within its estimate of $4 million to $6 million.


LEATHERY SMOKY WOODY FLORAL MUSTY
WINE OF THE YEAR
OAKY MUSTY FLORAL COMPLEX
PEPPERY GINGERY CURRANTY
FRUITY EARTHY SPICY SILKY HERBY MUSTY

Chris Wadden; Tia Gemmel/California State Fair (ribbons)

A matter of taste

Why wine competitions don't mean much

By Leonard Mlodinow

Acting on an informant's tip in June 1973, French tax inspectors barged into the offices of the 155-year-old Cruse et Fils Frères wine shippers. Eighteen men were eventually prosecuted by the French government, accused, among other things, of passing off humble wines from the Languedoc region as the noble and five-times-as-costly wine of Bordeaux. During the trial it came out that the Bordeaux wine merchants regularly defrauded foreigners. One vat of wine considered extremely inferior, for example, was labeled "Salable as Beaujolais to Americans."

It was in this climate that in the 1970s an American lawyer-turned-wine-critic named Robert M. Parker Jr. decided to aid consumers by assigning wines a grade on a 100-point scale. Today, critics like Mr. Parker exert enormous influence. The medals won at the 29 major U.S. wine competitions are considered so influential that wineries spend well over $1 million each year in entry fees. According to a 2001 study of Bordeaux wines, a one-point bump in Robert Parker's wine ratings averages to a 7% increase in price, and the price difference can be much greater at the high end.

Given the high price of wine and the enormous number of choices, a system in which industry experts comb through the forest of wines, judge them and offer consumers the meaningful shortcut of medals and ratings makes sense.

But what if the successive judgments of the same wine, by the same wine expert, vary so widely that the ratings and medals on which wines base their reputations are merely a powerful illusion? That is the conclusion reached in two recent papers in the Journal of Wine Economics.

Ribbons from the 2009 California State Fair wine competition

Both articles were authored by the same man, a unique blend of winemaker, scientist and statistician. The unlikely revolutionary is a soft-spoken fellow named Robert Hodgson, a retired professor who taught statistics at Humboldt State University in California. Since 1976, Mr. Hodgson also has been the proprietor of Fieldbrook Winery, a small operation that produces about 10 wines each year, selling 1,500 cases.

A few years ago, Mr. Hodgson began wondering how wines, such as his own, can win a gold medal at one competition and "end up in the pooper" at others. He decided to take a course in wine judging, and met G.M "Pooch" Pucilowski, chief judge at the California State Fair wine competition, North America's oldest and most prestigious. Mr. Hodgson joined the Wine Competition's advisory board, and eventually "begged" to run a controlled scientific study of the tastings, conducted in the same manner as the real-world tastings. The board agreed, but expected the results to be kept confidential.

There is a rich history of scientific research questioning whether wine experts can really make the fine taste distinctions they claim. For example, a 1996 study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology showed that even flavor-trained professionals cannot reliably identify more than three or four components in a mixture, although wine critics regularly report tasting six or more. There are eight in this description, from The Wine News, as quoted on wine.com, of a Silverado Limited Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 that sells for more than $100 a bottle: "Dusty, chalky scents followed by mint, plum, tobacco and leather. Tasty cherry with smoky oak accents....."

Another publication, The Wine Advocate, describes a wine as having "promising aromas of lavender, roasted herbs, blueberries and black currants." What is striking about this pair of descriptions is that, although they are very different, they are descriptions of the same Cabernet. One taster lists eight flavors

and scents, the other four, and not one of them coincide.

That wine critiques are peppered with such inconsistencies is exactly what the laboratory experiments would lead you to expect. In fact, about 20 years ago, when a Harvard psychologist asked an ensemble of experts to rank five wines on each of 12 characteristics—such as tannins, sweetness and fruitiness—the experts agreed at a level significantly better than chance on only three of the 12.

Psychologists also have been skeptical of wine judgments because context and expectation influence the perception of taste. In a 1963 study at the University of California at Davis, researchers secretly added color to a dry white wine to simulate a sauterne, sherry, rosé, Bordeaux and burgundy, and then asked experts to rate the sweetness of the various wines. Their sweetness judgments reflected the type of wine they thought they were drinking. In France a decade ago, a wine researcher named Fréderic Brochet served 57 French wine experts two identical midrange Bordeaux wines, one in an expensive Grand Cru bottle, the other accommodated in the bottle of a cheap table wine. The gurus showed a significant preference for the Grand Cru bottle, employing adjectives like "excellent" more often for the Grand Cru, and "unbalanced" and "flat" more often for the table wine.

Provocative as they are, such studies have been easy for wine critics to dismiss. Some were small-scale and theoretical. Many were performed in artificial laboratory conditions, or failed to control important environmental factors. And none of the rigorous studies tested the actual wine experts whose judgments you see in magazines and marketing materials. But Mr. Hodgson's research was different.

In his first study, each year, for four years, Mr. Hodgson served actual panels of California State Fair Wine Competition judges—some 70 judges each year—about 100 wines over a two-day period. He employed the same blind tasting process as the actual competition. In Mr. Hodgson's study, however, every wine was presented to each judge three different times, each time drawn from the same bottle.

The results astonished Mr. Hodgson. The judges' wine ratings typically varied by four points on a standard ratings scale running from 80 to 100. A wine rated 91 on one tasting would often be rated an 87 or 95 on the next. Some of the judges did much worse, and only about one in 10 regularly rated the same wine within a range of two points.

Mr. Hodgson also found that the judges whose ratings were most consistent in any given year landed in the middle of the pack in other years, suggesting that their consistent performance that year had simply been due to chance.

Mr. Hodgson said he wrote up his findings each year and asked the board for permission to publish the results; each year, the answer was no. Finally, the board relented—according to Mr. Hodgson, on a close vote—and the study appeared in January in the Journal of Wine Economics.

"I'm happy we did the study," said Mr. Pucilowski, "though I'm not exactly happy with the results. We have the best judges, but maybe we humans are not as good as we say we are."

This September, Mr. Hodgson dropped his other bombshell. This time, from a private newsletter called The California Grapevine, he obtained the complete records of wine competitions, listing not only which wines won medals, but which did not. Mr. Hodgson told me that when he started playing with the data he "noticed that the probability that a wine which won a gold medal in one competition would win nothing in others was high." The medals seemed to be spread around at random, with each wine having about a 9% chance of winning a gold medal in any given competition.

To test that idea, Mr. Hodgson restricted his attention to wines entering a certain number of competitions, say five. Then he made a bar graph of the number of wines winning 0, 1, 2, etc. gold medals in those competitions. The graph was nearly identical to the one you'd get if you simply made five flips of a coin weighted to land on heads with a probability of 9%. The distribution of medals, he wrote, "mirrors what might be expected should a gold medal be awarded by chance alone."

Mr. Hodgson's work was publicly dismissed as an absurdity by one wine expert, and "hogwash" by another. But among wine makers, the reaction was different. "I'm not surprised," said Bob Cabral, wine maker at critically acclaimed Williams-Selyem Winery in Sonoma County. In Mr. Cabral's view, wine ratings are influenced by uncontrolled factors such as the time of day, the number of hours since the taster last ate and the other wines in the lineup. He also says critics taste too many wines in too short a time. As a result, he says, "I would expect a taster's rating of the same wine to vary by at least three, four, five points from tasting to tasting."

Francesco Grande, a vintner whose family started making wine in 1827 Italy, told me of a friend at a well-known Paso Robles winery who had conducted his own test, sending the same wine to a wine competition under three different labels. Two of the identical samples were rejected, he said, "one with the comment 'undrinkable'." The third bottle was awarded a double gold medal. "Email Robert Parker," he suggested, "and ask him to submit to a controlled blind tasting."

I did email Mr. Parker, and was amazed when he responded that he, too, did not find Mr. Hodgson's results surprising. "I generally stay within a three-point deviation," he wrote. And though he didn't agree to Mr. Grande's challenge, he sent me the results of a blind tasting in which he did participate.

The tasting was at Executive Wine Seminars in New York, and consisted of three flights of five wines each. The participants knew they were 2005 Bordeaux wines that Mr. Parker had previously rated for an issue of The Wine Advocate. Though they didn't know which wine was which, they were provided with a list of the 15 wines, with Mr. Parker's prior ratings, according to Executive Wine Seminars' managing partner Howard Kaplan. The wines were chosen, Mr. Kaplan says, because they were 15 of Mr. Parker's highest-rated from that vintage.

Mr. Parker pointed out that, except in three cases, his second rating for each wine fell "within a two-to-three point deviation" of his first. That's less variation than Mr. Hodgson found. One possible reason: Mr. Parker's first rating of all the wines fell between 95 and 100—not a large spread.

One critic who recognizes that variation is an issue is Joshua Greene, editor and publisher of Wine and Spirits, who told me, "It is absurd for people to expect consistency in a taster's ratings. We're not robots." In the 1970s Cruse et Fils Frères wine trial, the company appealed to the idea that even experienced tasters could err. Cruse claimed that it had bought the cheap Languedoc believing it was the kingly Bordeaux, and that the company's highly trained and well-paid wine tasters had failed to perceive that it wasn't. The French rejected that possibility, and 35 years ago this December, eight wine dealers were convicted and given prison terms and fines totaling $8 million.

Despite his studies, Mr. Hodgson is betting that, like the French, American consumers won't be easily converted to the idea that wine experts are fallible. His winery's Web site still boasts of his own many dozens of medals.

"Even though ratings of individual wines are meaningless, people think they are useful," said Mr. Greene of Wine and Spirits. He added, however, that one can look at the average ratings of a spectrum of wines from a certain producer, region or year to identify useful trends.

As a consumer, accepting that one taster's tobacco and leather is another's blueberries and currants, that a 91 and a 96 rating are interchangeable, or that a wine winning a gold medal in one competition is likely thrown in the pooper in others presents a challenge. If you ignore the web of medals and ratings, how do you decide where to spend your money?

One answer would be to do more experimenting, and to be more price-sensitive, refusing to pay for medals and ratings points. Another tack is to continue to rely on the medals and ratings, adopting an approach often attributed to physicist Neils Bohr, who was said to have had a horseshoe hanging over his office door for good luck. When asked how a physicist could believe in such things, he said, "I am told it works even if you don't believe in it." Or you could just shrug and embrace the attitude of Julia Child, who, when asked what was her favorite wine, replied "gin."

As for me, I have always believed in the advice given by famed food critic Waverly Root, who recommended that one simply "drink wine every day, at lunch and dinner, and the rest will take care of itself."

Leonard Mlodinow teaches randomness at California Institute of Technology.

Photo illustration by Donna Kugleman/The Wall Street Journal; Getty Images (bottle); Alamy (puddle); Tia Gemmel/California State Fair (bottom)

Wines are poured at the California State Fair wine competition in June 2008.

Arbitrage

A turkey

NewsCom

City	Currency	US$
New York		$23
Hong Kong	HK$240	$31
Kuala Lumpur	127 ringgit	$38
Singapore	S$52	$38
Manila	1,700 pesos	$39
Jakarta	381,333 rupiah	$41
Shanghai	430 yuan	$63
Bangkok	2,300 baht	$69
Brussels	€48	$71
Frankfurt	€48	$71
London	£45	$76

5.5 kilograms, frozen and uncooked

Prices, including taxes, as provided by centrally located retailers in each city, averaged and converted to the nearest U.S. dollar

Sushi master chef Tadashi Yamagata, a fourth-generation owner of Miyaokozushi restaurant in Tokyo's Nihonbashi area, prepares sushi of maguro, or tuna, and of toro, or fatty tuna, behind the counter of his Tokyo restaurant.

Alfie Goodrich for The Wall Street Journal

A Ma

By Ayai Tomisawa

Tokyo

At Sushi Mizutani restaurant in Tokyo's tony Ginza district, the scent of vinegar, a key ingredient in sushi-making, hangs in the air. In the midst of the minimally designed space, chef and owner Hachiro Mizutani has the stage.

Wearing a starched white outfit, the 62-year-old sushi master slides a knife smoothly in one direction as he slices tuna. The only tuna he buys is *haragami ichiban*, the upper belly, whose higher fat content makes it coveted. And, at about $670 a kilogram, it's the most expensive part of the fish. Brushing homemade *nikiri*, a mixture of soy sauce, sake and *mirin* (sweet cooking wine), on a piece, he gently places it in front of a customer. It's a work of art, and part of a 15-piece set dinner that costs about $165.

Mr. Mizutani, who opened his restaurant five years ago after managing a sushi eatery in Yokohama for 12 years, knows his performance is being observed and he knows what his customers are watching—his hands.

"These are the tools of the trade," he says, adding that keeping his hands smooth and clean is one of the most important prerequisites in sushi-making. To protect them, he refrains from engaging such potentially hand-bruising activities as tennis and baseball.

The chef, whose eatery has three Michelin stars, also is being judged on his knowledge as well as the rapport he builds with his customers. When a diner sitting at the 10-seat sushi counter asks where a particular fish was caught, Mr. Mizutani promptly explains that it came from the Tsugaru Strait, between Honshu and Hokkaido.

Being served by a sushi master is the ultimate bespoke food experience in Japan. But the practice is on the wane, undermined by a proliferation of sushi-chain restaurants—including casual eateries where dishes are delivered on a conveyor belt—that are pushing smaller restaurants, often family-owned, out of business. What's more, a growing reluctance among young Japanese to undergo the nearly 10 years of required training threatens the future supply of sushi masters. Most sushi chefs are men; women rarely enter the field partly because of the

aster's Touch

Sushi and the secrets of its chefs

Clockwise from top left: Mr. Yamagata's day begins early in the morning at Tsukiji market where he supervises the cutting of a $400 piece of tuna he has just bought; Mr. Yamagata weaves his way through the busy marketplace carrying heavy baskets that bear the phone number of his restaurant; all of the morning's purchases are delivered to a particular spot at the edge of the market, where Mr. Yamagata checks them before carrying the order to the restaurant by motorbike.

physical labor involved in procuring supplies from the fish market and partly because of a cultural stigma.

According to the national union of sushi chefs in Japan, the number of chefs has dropped in step with the number of registered sushi restaurants in the country, which has fallen to 9,000 as of November 2009 from 10,000 in 2006. In 1992, there were 20,000.

Today's aspiring sushi chefs "want to skip the hard part and start making sushi pieces right away. But it doesn't work that way, because a sushi chef is not just a chef," says Tadashi Yamagata, 61, the fourth-generation owner of Miyakozushi restaurant in Tokyo's Nihonbashi area, who also heads Japan's sushi-chef union.

Much of the charm of sushi, known in Japan as *edomaezushi* (edomae means in front of Edo Bay, the old name for Tokyo Bay when the city was known as Edo, where fish for sushi was caught) or *nigirizushi* (hand-crafted pieces), rests with the sushi master behind the counter, who, in addition to preparing sushi, must make his customers feel special. A good sushi master observes his customers' eating habits, making softer pieces for those who eat with the fingers, firmer ones for chopstick-users so that a piece doesn't fall apart when it is dipped in soy sauce. Communication skills are also a must. Sushi chefs are "stage performers," says Mr. Yamagata, with customers as the audience. Every movement, from how the chef maneuvers his knife or rolls a warm rice ball by hand, is on show.

Food historians say that sushi, which has become so identified with Japan, didn't actually originate there. They say that it dates back to the sixth century B.C. in Southeast Asia, where salted fish, after being cleaned and gutted, was preserved by fermenting it in rice for six months to a year.

"Back then, they used to eat only the fish and throw away the rice," says Terutoshi Hibino, a professor of food culture at Nagoya Keizai University's Junior College. The preserved fish spread north through China during the fifth century B.C., and is said to have arrived in Japan more than a thousand years later, where it was called *narezushi*. The fermentation period was later cut to one to three months. And this type of sushi, called *nama* narezushi ("nama" means "raw") became popular in the Muromachi or Ashikaga period (1338-1573).

It wasn't until the end of the Edo or Tokugawa era (1603-1868) that sushi was served in bite-size pieces. According to food historians, that's when Yohei Hanaya sold it by the piece from his street-side stall in Tokyo. Customers munched them while standing, so for decades sushi was considered a finger food. Many vendors later built areas where customers could sit down at tables and place orders directly with the chef. That evolved into the modern sushi counter, where the sushi master could perform and serve his customers in close quarters.

Ironically, the more popular sushi has grown, the less popular the profession has become. "Sadly, I don't think many kids today know the difference in taste between mass-produced sushi and sushi served at traditional sushi restaurants," says Mr. Hibino, the food culture professor. "They just haven't had the chance to eat authentic sushi." (Machines play a role in processing the sushi sold in grocery stores and fast-food restaurants in Japan today.)

A sushi master's day begins before sunrise and ends well after the sun has set. The path to the top is tough: It takes diligence and patience. First there's an apprenticeship, a humbling, busboy existence spent cleaning bathrooms, mopping floors and sharpening knives. The next step, after a few years, is to move up to do *shikomi*, or food preparation, a meticulous job that is vital to sushi-making.

Along the way, there are no recipes to guide, nor instructors in the usual sense; the onus is on each student to learn by observing.

Besides the deterrent of heavy physical labor, cultural holdovers discourage women from becoming sushi masters in Japan. Some diners worry that a female chef might use hand cream or other cosmetics that could affect the taste of the fish. And according to an old wives' tale, a woman's hands tend to be warmer than a man's and therefore unsuitable for sushi-making.

"That's rubbish," sniffs Masako Yokoi, a

Sushi tips

Eating sushi at the counter is like ordering a drink at a bar, except there typically isn't a menu and the offerings change with the seasons.

The smart thing to do is to order the omakase nigiri set, which is the chef's sushi special. Be warned that ordering sashimi (thin slices of raw fish served with soy sauce), usually called tsumami, or appetizer, could double your bill, especially if the chef offers you the coveted fish of the day.

At Tadashi Yamagata's sushi restaurant, Miyakozushi, there are 20 to 30 kinds of fish ready to be served, depending on the season. The chef's special here is a combination of 10 pieces of sushi, three rolls and a soup. The price is 3,700 yen (about $41).

At the upscale Mizutani, the price of an omakase nigiri set of 15 pieces is fixed at 15,000 yen (about $165). (You can order sushi by the piece at most sushi restaurants, but brace yourself for a whopping bill. The cost of each piece is based on the market price of the fish that day.)

It's fine to eat sushi with your fingers. Because the chef serves with his hands, customers may receive his hospitality using their hands. It's also OK to use chopsticks.

"Women tend to use chopsticks because they like to keep their fingers clean," says Toshiyuki Shinohara, 53 years old, who owns Kouzushi in Tokyo's Taito Ward. "For chopstick eaters, I make pieces a little firmer."

There are no rules about the order in which individual pieces should be consumed. But when switching to akami, or lean fish (usually a red-meat fish like tuna) from shiromi, or a white-fleshed fish like snapper, it's good to refresh your taste buds by eating gari (pickled ginger).

Most sushi restaurants serve beer and sake (rice wine) and, of course, complimentary green tea. Kouzushi also serves white wine, shochu (an alcoholic beverage that can be made from materials ranging from barley to sweet potatoes) and even whiskey.

"There are customers who only drink wine, and white wine goes well with fish," says Mr. Shinohara. "Since customers' tastes are diversified, we need to diversify our drink selection, too."

Some chefs speak, or understand, English, but it wouldn't hurt to have a Japanese speaker write down the address and what you'd like to order—like the chef's special.

And in the sushi world, going to the same restaurant more than once is called "ura wo kaesu," meaning that you are remembered as a repeat customer. If the chef remembers you, he is more likely to let you know what he's got for the day's catch.

—Ayai Tomisawa

Alfie Goodrich for The Wall Street Journal (Yamagata); Fred Lewis for The Wall Street Journal (Yokoi; Eifukuzushi)

Top, Masako Yokoi behind the counter of her Hokkaido restaurant, Eifukuzushi. Taking over as sushi chef after her husband passed away, she overcame criticism from some customers, who felt a woman's 'cold hands' weren't suitable for preparing sushi; below, Mr. Yamagata, far right, and his chief assistant personally cater customers tastes.

female sushi chef in northern Japan. "Whenever my customers tell me about that superstition, I always let them touch my hands to show how cold they are!"

Becoming a sushi chef wasn't part of Ms. Yokoi's life plan. She was 42 when her husband, a sushi-restaurant owner, passed away; she decided to take over his business.

"I wanted to carry on this restaurant because this is what he left behind," says Ms. Yokoi, now 61. Before her husband died, he taught her sushi-making. Her restaurant, Eifukuzushi, in Haboro, Hokkaido, is well-known for its quality fish.

It wasn't easy at first. In a small town like hers, gossip reached her ears quickly. "People were saying I should not be making sushi because I am a woman," she says. Even regular customers were skeptical about her ability to make sushi properly.

"When I was making sushi next to my husband when he was alive, they were fine," she says. "But when I became the lead chef, they were suddenly nervous and asked if I am suited for the job because women's hands are said to be warmer."

In the beginning, she was insecure. Instead of serving customers at the seven-seat ground-floor bar, she escorted them up to the second floor to avoid facing them.

"I was being reserved even though no one asked me to," she says. "There is no need to do that. Confidence is the state of your mind, not something controlled by society." One day, she tied a traditional Japanese headband around her head as a sign of perseverance and spirit. Ms. Yokoi, who has a staff of two, now holds court over her 39-seat sushi restaurant, and serves customers from behind the counter.

A day in the life of Mr. Yamagata, who operates the 68-seat Miyakozushi restaurant, gives some idea of what it takes to be a traditional Japanese sushi master.

The morning starts with selecting fresh fish at Tokyo's Tsukiji market, one of the world's largest, where more than 200 tons of marine products are traded every day. Mr. Yamagata rises at 5 a.m. and arrives at the market by 7 a.m.; if he shows up any later, he might not have enough time to prepare the fish for the lunchtime rush, which begins at 11:30 a.m.

Wearing durable blue trousers (his restaurant's uniform), a waterproof jacket and bulky rubber boots—the boots are a must at Tsukiji, where workers, without warning, wash away dirt and fish guts smeared on the floor, using hoses and buckets—Mr. Yamagata walks briskly through the chaotic market, where aggressive chefs and fish-shop owners vie for vendors' attention as they bargain hard.

"If you are a familiar face, you can also be demanding, like asking them to give you a better quality fish or a discount," says Mr. Yamagata, who has been shopping there for more than 40 years. "Our relationship is based on trust and it can only be earned over time."

Some dealers specialize in *hikarimono* ("shiny objects" in Japanese), fish with shimmering skin such as *kohada* (gizzard shad) and *saba* (mackerel). Other shops sell just shellfish. There are vendors that specialize in *anago*, or saltwater eel, as well as flounder and other popular marine products such as salmon head and sea urchin. And every item has a tag saying where it is from, such as Hokkaido, Niigata Prefecture or Aichi Prefecture.

"Customers want to know where the fish are from, and it's a way of communicating with them at the bar counter," Mr. Yamagata says, while shaking off unwanted water from a mirugai clam as he pays by weight—$3.30 for 100 grams. On average, Mr. Yamagata's morning quarry costs between 120,000 and 200,000 yen ($1,300 to $2,200) a day. His daily revenue at the restaurant runs between 500,000 yen and 600,000 yen (about $5,600 to $6,700).

Like Mr. Yamagata, many sushi chefs inherit family-owned restaurants. He took over his modestly priced restaurant—now 122 years old—24 years ago. (For aspiring chefs without a family restaurant, the path starts with an apprenticeship at a venerable restaurant.)

As a toddler, Mr. Yamagata accompanied his father and his grandfather, then the head chef at Miyakozushi, to Tsukiji market. He would ride to the market in a large wooden box tied to a bicycle pedaled by his father. When the box was full of fish and prawns, he would ride the train back to the restaurant with his grandfather. After high school, he spent a year at culinary school to learn the basics of cooking, hygiene and nutrition. By the time he was 19, he was an apprentice at the family restaurant.

"I wanted to be a sushi chef as long as I can remember," Mr. Yamagata says. "I grew up...watching my family make sushi."

It takes two people from Miyakozushi to shop at Tsujiki. Most days Mr. Yamagata goes with a restaurant staffer. On some Saturdays, Rieko, one of his two daughters, helps her father. After buying the fish, they eat breakfast at a restaurant in the market before heading back. One rides a motorbike and carries the fish; the other takes the lightweight food, such as horseradish-like wasabi and other vegetables, by bicycle.

Inside the Miyakozushi kitchen, every piece of fish, whether it's from 400-kilogram tuna or a palm-size gizzard shad, is filleted and "prepared." Most sushi is served raw, but each piece is primed in a certain way before it's served: Mackerel is steeped in vinegar; flounder is laid between seaweed sheets. Among those that are cooked, saltwater eel is boiled slowly until it becomes tender, and octopus is cleaned with salt, tenderized by blows with a wooden bar and then slowly simmered with *hojicha* (roasted green tea) in boiling water. (It's too stiff to chew otherwise.) Sea urchin is chilled at about five degrees Celsius, which makes it milder and smoother so it melts on the tongue. And tuna spends three days in the refrigerator to develop *umami*, the "fifth taste" first identified by a Japanese scientist a century ago that is usually defined as a meaty, savory, satisfying taste.

"Even the same kind of fish needs to be prepared differently in the summer than in the winter," says Mr. Yamagata. In cooler months, he puts extra salt on shad and mackerel because the fish tend to put on fat in the winter. Apply the same amount of salt in summer, though, and the fish gets waterlogged.

Finally, the rice: Once cooked, it's kept at 37 degrees Celsius. "It can't be too hot, but it can't be too cold; body temperature is about right," says Mr. Yamagata, who swaps his blue uniform for a white top and trousers to serve customers.

Everything must be done by 11 a.m. for the lunchtime rush, which ends at 2 p.m. Staffers take turns eating a quick lunch, usually sandwiches or bento boxes of rice and side dishes that are ordered in; the sushi is reserved for the customers. Mr. Yamagata naps for 30 minutes or an hour at about 3 p.m. Then at 5:30 p.m., dinner starts. It's a hustle until about 10:30, when the last customer leaves and the restaurant staff can start cleaning. Mr. Yamagata finally locks up around midnight and goes up to the third floor of the building, where he lives with his wife.

He repeats this routine six days a week; the restaurant is closed Sundays.

Mr. Yamagata doesn't plan to pass his business on to his two daughters. Rather, his younger daughter Rieko, 27, who works at the restaurant as a waitress, married a sushi chef. If all goes as planned, the son-in-law eventually will take over the family business.

Eifukuzushi
Chef: Masako Yokoi
Haborocho Minami Sanjo 1-chome
Tomamae, Hokkaido
☎ 81-164-62-1413

Kouzushi
Chef: Toshiyuki Shinohara
3-4-8 Kuramae
Taito-ku, Tokyo
☎ 81-3-3863-1622

Miyakozushi
Chef: Tadashi Yamagata
1-6-5 Kakigaracho, Nihonbashi
Chuo-ku, Tokyo
☎ 81-3-3666-3851

Sushi Mizutani
Chef: Hachiro Mizutani
8-2-10 B1F Ginza
Chuo-ku, Tokyo
☎ 81-3-3573-5258

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Little cabin in the big woods

Travel writer Tim Cahill finds inspiration in a tiny log house

By Alexandra Alter

Gallatin National Forest, Montana

Tim Cahill has traveled to 100 countries, riding on horseback across the steppes of Mongolia, hiking through remote villages in southeastern Turkey in search of the supposedly extinct Caspian Tiger, driving a truck from the tip of Patagonia to Alaska and going swimming in an ice hole on the North Pole.

The veteran travel writer chronicles these adventures from a 500-square-foot cabin hidden in a thickly forested river canyon in southwest Montana. The cabin sits in this national forest on the edge of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, about an hour's drive down gravel roads from the "big town" of Livingston, where Mr. Cahill has a house.

"It's often hilarious to me that I'm writing about Tonga or some tropical place and there's a blizzard outside and the cows are on their backs with their hooves in the air," said Mr. Cahill, a founding editor of Outside magazine and author of nine books, including "A Wolverine Is Eating My Leg" and "Jaguars Ripped My Flesh." Mr. Cahill, whose wife died in a traffic accident last year, often stays at the cabin for weeklong stretches, and all told spends a couple of months out of the year there.

Built in 1931 by a dude-ranch hand, the log cabin looks like it could have been plucked off a movie set, so much so that Mr. Cahill's 8-year-old niece asked if it was fake when she visited. Mr. Cahill, 65 years old, bought the cabin, which came with two freestanding log guest cabins and an outhouse, in 1991 for $60,000. He leases the land, about 2,000 square meters, from the U.S. Forest Service for $2,605 a year.

Hidden from the dirt road by deciduous trees, the cabin is barely big enough for the basics: a kitchen with a wood-burning Monarch stove and a dining nook, a living room with a pitched, wooden beam roof and a big stone fireplace, which warms the place up in about two hours in the winter, and a cramped bedroom that has an exposed sink, toilet and bathtub at one end (the outhouse is for the guest cabins). The living room is decorated with wicker chairs and a sofa that evokes the 1970s. Mr. Cahill's desk sits in a corner that's crammed with books, including "Edible Native Plants of the Rocky Mountains" and "Field Guide to Western Birds."

Janie Osborne for The Wall Street Journal

Tim Cahill's cabin and woodshed, above; Mr. Cahill at the window, right

The screen door off the kitchen opens onto a porch where Mr. Cahill sometimes makes barbecued chicken "Simon and Garfunkel style," with parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. About 48 kilometers from the nearest town, he subsists on "cabin food" such as chili, ribs or gamey stews with antelope, elk or venison. It's pretty tame fare compared with what he's sampled around the world: boiled fermented cow's nose in Bali, acacia beetles in Africa, roasted guinea pigs in Peru and baked turtle lung in Australia ("spongy," Mr. Cahill said).

The main attraction lies just off the property. The 728,000-hectare Gallatin forest spans six mountain ranges and is part of the Greater Yellowstone Area, the largest intact ecosystem in the continental U.S. "My backyard, honest to God, is pretty much the size of Switzerland," Mr. Cahill said. The cabin is one of 198 that are privately owned; the Forest Service charges private owners an annual permit fee through a "recreation residence program" that dates back to the early 1890s. A similar 546-square-foot one-bedroom cabin in the Gallatin Canyon is on the market for $125,000.

Mr. Cahill has frequently wandered in Montana's vast parks and back country, misadventures he chronicled in his 2004 book "Lost in My Own Backyard." He describes the unnerving feeling of being "alone, twenty miles (about 32 kilometers) from the nearest road, and you've just found a grizzly bear track the size of a pizza."

Larry Lahren, an archaeologist who lives nearby, said Mr. Cahill has survived such excursions through "pure luck." Once, when the two of them were hunting antelope, Mr. Cahill forgot his sleeping bag, said Mr. Lahren, who added that Mr. Cahill was "the ultimate greenhorn" when he first arrived in Montana. "He was the world's worst horseback rider," he said.

Southwest Montana has long attracted writers, artists and celebrities. Mr. Cahill counts novelists Jim Harrison, Walter Kirn and Tom McGuane among his neighbors. Mr. Cahill moved to Livingston in 1979, but as the town grew into a creative hub with more than a dozen art galleries, he decided he needed a place where he could write without people dropping by or inviting him out.

"For a guy who doesn't like crowds, he's always got people seeking him out," said Scott McMillion, a Montana native and writer who has known Mr. Cahill for 20 years.

Mr. Cahill usually writes in the morning, then takes a long hike on one of the many trails leading up into the mountains of a thickly forested canyon. His favorite walks are along the river, or up into the foothills behind his cabin, to a spot where two branches of creek collide and throw a colorful prism of mist into the air. "The shafts of light that come through have the quality of light that comes through a stained glass cathedral," Mr. Cahill said. "It all combines to make me feel good and rooted."

The beauty of brevity

At last, the short-story genre gets its moment

By Alexandra Alter

Praise for a short-story collection often sounds a bit like disparagement. Great short stories are hailed as having "novelistic" qualities, a subtle knock that affirms the novel's place as the highest literary achievement and the final measure of a writer's talent.

Lately, however, the short story seems poised to get its due. This autumn, a handful of collections from writers such as Alice Munro, Lydia Davis, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ha Jin have put a dent in the dominant view of short stories as an inferior cousin to the Great American Novel. And changing technology and reading habits have provided a boost for short fiction as more readers discover literature through online literary journals and Web sites, or download short fiction onto mobile devices.

Short stories have won unusual plaudits this year. Alice Munro won the 2009 Man Booker International Prize for her body of work; Elizabeth's Strout's short-story collection, "Olive Kitteridge," claimed the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. "Olive Kitteridge" has sold 472,000 copies according to Nielsen BookScan, which tracks about 75% of book sales—impressive for any kind of literary fiction.

"There's this myth of negativity around the popularity of the short story," said literary agent Susan Golomb, adding, "there have been some breakouts this year."

Such successes may not be enough to overturn the firm belief in publishing that short-story fiction doesn't sell. Publishers, wary of taking on short fiction, often insist on a two-book deal for stories and a novel.

Short stories have long been prized as a way for new writers to break onto the scene before they have the time or chops to write a novel. But it remains rare for a well-known writer to specialize in them. Even Alice Munro, who's been called the greatest living master of the short story, has said she got used to writing short fiction when she had children and couldn't find the time to write anything longer. Unlike most famous writers, however, she stuck with it: she's published 11 story collections and just one novel. "Too Much Happiness," due out next week, is more dramatic and violent than many of her previous works, which often deal with domestic life. The collection includes tales of a home invasion, interfamilial murders and sexual perversion.

Ann Close, Ms. Munro's editor for about 30 years, said the precision and vigor of Ms. Munro's plotting and prose allow her to pack as much into her stories as many novels contain. "Like any really great writer, a huge huge huge amount is between the lines," she said.

Lydia Davis—who has won a cult following for her ultrashort stories, which are sometimes just a paragraph—says she finds that shorter pieces sometimes have a bigger emotional impact because not a single word is wasted.

Some established writers say they feel pressure to deliver novels. Chinese-American author Ha Jin says a good batch of short stories "can do more than a novel" because it allows a writer to play with perspectives and voices without worrying about structural continuity. "I feel more at home with short stories, but the novel is a major form," said Mr. Jin, whose coming collection is set among Chinese immigrants in Queens. "Often, the writer is measured by that."

With the growing popularity of e-readers and digital devices, traditional publishing models are being challenged in ways that may benefit short fiction. "Flash fiction" Web sites, which post stories that are often 1,000 words or less, and online journals such as "Five Chapters," which serializes one story each week, have emerged as a literary niche for readers accustomed to browsing the Internet.

Some publishers are testing iTunes-like models for individual stories. Delacorte Press released 14 stories by the late Kurt Vonnegut as e-books for $1.99 each.

In January, Harper Perennial launched "Fifty-Two Stories," a Web site that publishes a story a week. Harper also has added "bonus stories" by new writers to classic collections by Melville, Tolstoy and others. Barb Johnson, whose stories are set in New Orleans, appears at the back of a collection by Dostoyevsky.

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John Cusack carries Morgan Lily in '2012'; right, a motion-capture version of Jim Carrey in 'A Christmas Carol'

Columbia Pictures (2012); Disney

What the Dickens!

'A Christmas Carol' fails to entertain; '2012' is a disaster

By Joe Morgenstern

To put it bluntly, if Scroogely, Disney's 3-D animated version of "A Christmas Carol" is a calamity. The pace is predominantly glacial—that alone would be enough to cook the goose of this premature holiday turkey—and the tone is joyless, despite an extended passage of bizarre laughter, several dazzling flights of digital fancy, a succession of striking images and Jim Carrey's voicing of Scrooge plus half a dozen other roles. "Why so coldhearted?" Scrooge's nephew, Fred, asks the old skinflint. The same question could be asked of Robert Zemeckis, who adapted and directed the film, and of the company that financed it. Why was simple pleasure frozen out of the production? Why does the beloved story feel embalmed by technology? And why are its characters as insubstantial as the snowflakes that seem to be falling on the audience?

A catchall answer—and by now an all-too-familiar one—lies in the unnature of that technology. Like "The Polar Express" and "Beowulf," which were also directed by Mr. Zemeckis, "A Christmas Carol" employs a motion-capture process that translates the movements of live actors into fantasy images. For its advocates, the process is cost-efficient and good enough. For its detractors, including me, motion capture has become synonymous with a special sort of semilifelessness—body language that is vaguely impoverished, faces with limited mobility and dead eyes.

In the global marketing push for his new film, the director has dismissed such problems as essentially solved. But they haven't been solved at all; they've only been mitigated, and partially masked by the novelty value of 3-D. Motion capture remains an impediment to capturing emotion. "A Christmas Carol" soars only when Scrooge is in temporal transit—one lyrical sequence flies him back to his boyhood village. And some of the action, as well as a cataclysmic climax fueled by hellfires and hellwinds, will scare little kids out of their little wits.

Dickens framed his novella as a moral tale. Disney sells it as a thrill ride—"The Polar Express" with a really bad Santa. Well, it's a free country, and a public-domain property. Nevertheless, you can almost see the various rooms on the Disneyland ride-to-be while the movie makes its way from Victorian past to fun-house future. (Maybe the ride's sound design-to-be is why the Ghost of Christmas Present laughs so long and maniacally.) In the turgid stretches between action sequences, the drama, or what's left of it, makes its way with such ponderous, self-important artistry that Scrooge's present threatens to become an eternity. This sad excuse for family entertainment tries to enshrine a classic while defacing it.

'2012'

Roland Emmerich's latest assault on planet Earth and its moviegoers isn't the end of the world: It only feels that way. This oafish epic about the End of Days—as predicted by the Mayan calendar—operates in a dead zone roughly equidistant between parody and idiocy. You do get the connection between tongue and cheek, but much of the humor still goes thud. A few action sequences rise to the challenge of the subject, but many of the digital effects look murky, and the cumulative effect is numbness. The only character with genuine, if grotesque, energy is Charlie Frost, a crackpot prophet, conspiracy theorist and pirate radio broadcaster played by Woody Harrelson; he provides a few jolts of Rapture schlock before the movie turns into destructo dreck.

For better or (mainly) worse, Mr. Emmerich is up to his old tricks. In "Independence Day" he tested our mettle with marauding aliens. In "The Day After Tomorrow" he unleashed global warming that precipitated global freezing. This time his cosmic weapon of choice is a beam of mutant neutrinos that emanates from the sun and, by heating the earth's core, destabilizes tectonic plates, defeats coherence (though the huge, disjointed production might have been conceived as a study in chaos theory) and degrades dialogue. ("An unprecedented international venture is under way," the American president tells his daughter during an intimate conversation couched in the near-English favored by Emmerich films.)

The international venture involves building what Charlie suspects to be a fleet of space ships that will save the rich and powerful before our planet goes the way of Krypton; to get a seat, the wild-eyed geezer says, "you'd have to be Bill Gates or Rupert Murdoch or some Russian billionaire." (Of the three, only a particularly obnoxious Russian billionaire has a confirmed reservation.) Since the White House has kept a lid of secrecy on the existence of the ships—which aren't really what Charlie suspects—it falls to the president's chief science advisor, Adrian Helmsley (Chiwetel Ejiofor), to uncover the truth. Once he does, however, Adrian, like his boss, seems blithely indifferent to the venture's ethical aspects, which aren't debated until the movie's climax. (The president finally wonders aloud if seats on the ships should have been offered in a lottery. That sounds like a plan, except for leaving six or seven billion passengers wait-listed.)

The script is so scatterbrained that no one ever seems to understand anything in real time; it's as if all reactions are on 30-minute delay. (The running time is 158 minutes.) What's more, "2012" has no discernible attitude toward the end of civilization, apart from the belief that there's a movie in it. The cast includes John Cusack as Jackson Curtis, a sci-fi novelist turned limo driver; Amanda Peet as Jackson's ex-wife, Kate; Danny Glover as the president; Thandie Newton as his daughter; and Oliver Platt as the president's steely chief of staff. Among the points of interest either damaged, disturbed or destroyed are Las Vegas, the Vatican, the Himalayas, the South Pole (relocated to Wisconsin), the Washington Monument, much of Wyoming and all of California. For once, Manhattan meets its fate offstage.

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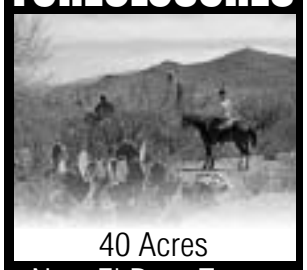

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Everett Collection ('Tin Cup'); NewsCom ('Bagger Vance'); AFP ('Gilmore')

Lack-of-action movies

Why golf seldom translates to the big screen

From the top, Will Smith, left, as the title character, advises Matt Damon as a troubled golfer in 'The Legend of Bagger Vance'; Kevin Costner, as an untroubled driving-range pro, putts his own way in Ron Shelton's 'Tin Cup'; affable game-show host Bob Barker, as himself, left, vs. Adam Sandler as Happy Gilmore

Golf Journal
JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

Los Angeles

For a sport with a great literature, golf has not inspired a bounty of great films. The most famous, "Caddyshack," is social satire. Its golf scenes are funny only because Bill Murray, Chevy Chase and Ted Knight are funny; the movie isn't really very interested in the game of golf itself. The same goes for "Happy Gilmore," one of only four golf movies ever to have sold more than $20 million in tickets at the U.S. box office. It stars Adam Sandler as a hockey-player-turned-golfer and is best known for the scene in which Mr. Sandler slugs game-show host Bob Barker.

That leaves "Tin Cup" and "The Legend of Bagger Vance" as the only commercial successes plausibly about golf itself. And the main reason they succeeded, it seems, is because the movie makers cleverly figured out ways to minimize their golfiness.

"You have to have characters for people who can't imagine playing golf, or worse yet, watching golf on TV, or worse even than that, listening to men talk about golf. The best way to clear out any room in America is to talk about how guys hit their three iron," said Ron Shelton, the man who co-wrote and directed "Tin Cup."

I spoke with Mr. Shelton over lunch recently at Riviera Country Club here in L.A., along with several others trying to get a project in motion: a new movie called "Q School," which takes its title from its setting—the excruciating year-end tournament that determines who qualifies for the final slots on the following season's PGA Tour. (Golfers who finish high enough on the money list in one season automatically qualify to play the next.) But golf movies are a tough sell.

Partly that's because so much of the tension and excitement that people who play the game experience is internal, and thus hard to dramatize. "The way we handled that in 'Tin Cup' was to lead up to a *mano-a-mano* gunfight at the end," Mr. Shelton said. The title character, played by Kevin Costner, was a talented but derelict golf pro who tries to qualify for the U.S. Open. "We've established his character, so the audience wonders if he's going to self-destruct. Can he hold it together for 72 holes? He doesn't, but the audience doesn't know how things will go wrong."

Another challenge is that, though golf courses can be beautiful in person, they tend to feel static in the context of a movie, and the pace of play is languid. "It's the slowest game to shoot by far. In sports movies, you've got to keep the game moving. It's got to be visually interesting, but golf is not on film."

It's also hard to find actors who can swing convincingly. In "Follow the Sun," a 1951 film starring Glenn Ford as Ben Hogan, Mr. Hogan himself served as a double for the golf scenes, but to preserve the illusion those sequences had to be shot from so far away that they lost verisimilitude. "Tin Cup" featured cameos by 35 Tour pros, and Mr. Costner was tutored by Gary McCord and Peter Kostis. "But we could never get Kevin to finish a swing right, so we had to turn that into a plot device," Mr. Shelton said. The solution was presenting the swing as one tailored to get the job done in windy West Texas, where the character came from.

The two actors attached to the "Q School" project so far are Dennis Quaid and Tim Allen. Mr. Quaid is a good golfer, but his swing is probably a bit too "scoopy," in Mr. Shelton's words, to pass for Tour quality. No problem, since he will be playing a former baseball superstar trying to make it on Tour. Mr. Allen, portraying a blue-collar club pro from Indiana, will need a swing double, Mr. Shelton said. "You can teach anybody to set up over the ball correctly, but it's harder than you'd think to teach nongolfers how to put the tee in the ground in just the right way, or to lean on their putters. Those things matter."

You might think, given the auspices of "Q School," that it would sail into production. The producer is David Friendly ("Big Momma's House," "Dr. Dolittle,""Little Miss Sunshine"); Mr. Shelton's credits include "Bull Durham" (baseball) and "White Men Can't Jump" with Woody Harrelson (basketball).

But the major studios are risk-averse these days. "The only thing they feel safe bankrolling are obvious concepts like 'Transformers' or 'Batman.' And golf movies aren't obvious," said Mr. Friendly. The studios are also concerned that golf movies don't have enough appeal outside the U.S., even though, as Mr. Friendly pointed out, the game is booming in Asia and is headed for the Olympics in 2016. There are other golf movies in development, including one based on Rick Reilly's novel "Missing Links," being developed for actor Steve Carell.

Messrs. Shelton and Friendly feel that the inherent drama of Q-School—where careers can depend on the outcome of a single shot—makes it the perfect setting for a golf movie. To help their cause, Mr. Shelton and his writing partner, John Norville, have sexed up the plot. There's a bombshell 17-year-old girl with a stage father trying to become the first female to qualify for the Tour, several studly young pros, one with a gorgeous mother for Mr. Quaid to hang with, and a charismatic young Asian player with distinct similarities to the 18-year-old Japanese sensation Ryo Ishikawa. "You have to make their plights universal," said Mr. Shelton. "That's the secret." Along with not talking about how to hit a three iron.

Percussion Moves to Center Stage

By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim

When Jonathan Haas set out to pursue a career as a solo percussionist 30 years ago, he knew he was in for a struggle. At Juilliard, he was at first barred from giving a recital—a requirement for students of any other instrument—on the grounds that there was not enough repertoire. After graduation, his application to the Martha Baird Rockefeller Foundation to fund a recital at Carnegie Hall was disqualified because, he was told, his was not a musical instrument. Mr. Haas confronted the foundation's president, listing the works by Samuel Barber, Steve Reich and Karl-Heinz Stockhausen he was planning to play. He eventually won the grant, but only after giving a demonstration in front of a panel of experts brought in to determine whether the noise he produced with his drumsticks and mallets was, in fact, music.

Today, Mr. Haas presides over the "percussion penthouse" at New York University, a sprawling loft filled with $150,000 in equipment—including drums, gongs, cymbals, marimbas, xylophones, a full set of steel drums, and the world's largest timpani, which Mr. Haas built out of a 100-year-old 6-foot-wide copper kettle once used to churn cheese. His students, and their fellow percussionists at conservatories all over the country, are now routinely required to give recitals.

> The instruments are popular with audiences—and composers.

For inspiration they can look to percussionists such as Evelyn Glennie and Colin Currie, who have thriving solo careers fueled by a growing repertoire of pieces written for them by new and established composers. Solo percussion music appears on concert calendars across the country, drawing large, enthusiastic audiences.

When Ms. Glennie grew up in rural Scotland in the 1970s, she assumed the world was full of percussionists. Encouraged by a teacher who, as she recalls, treated his students first as musicians, and then as players of a particular instrument, "it was perfectly natural to stand up and give a percussion recital. It was only when I became a full-time student at the Royal Academy of Music in London that the boundaries appeared and bridges had to be crossed and people said 'well, it isn't possible to be a solo percussionist, there isn't anything to play!'"

To generate new pieces, Ms. Glennie sifted through the directory of British composers and wrote hundreds of letters asking for new works. "I received various replies, from 'yes' to 'yes, my fee is. . .' to 'no, I'm too busy,'" she says. "And gradually the repertoire changed from arrangements and transcriptions to a body of my own pieces."

Mr. Haas, meanwhile, commissioned a concerto for timpani from Philip Glass—a process that once again required determination due to the composer's reluctance to write for such an unusual solo instrument. The resulting "Concerto Fantasy for Two Timpanists," however, has become one of Mr. Glass's most popular pieces, performed more than 50 times with orchestras all over the world.

Part of the appeal of percussion music is visual. The Glass concerto has 14 timpani lined up at the front of the stage—an effect that, to the front rows of an audience, can feel a little like staring up close at heavy artillery. In pieces for mixed percussion, the number and variety of instruments can be formidable. In addition to drawing on the traditional components of a symphony orchestra's percussion section, composers are employing ethnic drums from Africa and Asia as well as "found instruments"—objects that, when struck, resonate in a way that can be explored musically.

Lee Salem Photography

Jonathan Haas performs Philip Glass's Concerto Fantasy.

Brake drums—car-brake disks of varying sizes usually struck with hammers—have become so popular with contemporary composers that Mr. Haas estimates there are now up to 200 orchestral pieces featuring them. Ms. Glennie has developed an instrument she calls the batonka, consisting of two octaves of tuned PVC piping, which she will occasionally ask composers to include in their works. Tan Dun's "Concerto for Water Percussion" uses miked-up bowls of water that the player must by turn strike, slap or stir.

At the same time, there is the uniquely athletic—and often theatrical—aspect of percussion performance. Mr. Haas recalls a formative encounter with Stomu Yamashta in the late 1960s in which the Japanese percussionist would strike gongs with martial-arts kicks. Many composers exploit the spatial aspect involved in negotiating a large number of instruments to dramatic effect, or add lighting as in the case of Mr. Tan's concerto. "The visuals are inescapable, but it must never be histrionic," warns Mr. Currie, who adds that his "tenet has always been to get percussion away from the circus act."

And yet the extramusical elements may be the reason percussion music is so popular with audiences, and often draws crowds that are substantially younger than average. Sometimes it bridges the divide between classical music and rock: Mr. Yamashta remains an icon in alternative rock circles; a percussion concerto by Stewart Copeland, the former drummer of The Police, will be given its premiere next year by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. Perhaps most intriguing is the fact that percussion music is in such demand despite its association with contemporary music—usually considered toxic for ticket sales.

"I think that concert presenters still scratch their heads and don't understand why this phenomenon is occurring," says Mr. Haas. "They don't want to recognize the fact that drums, which not so long ago were considered to not be a concert instrument, have now taken over as the predominant attraction of new audiences.

"In other non-European, non-Western cultures drumming is not only the center of the creative and musical process, but the spiritual core of the whole culture. In our culture, drums have been seen as something that sits in the back and goes boom-boom-boom. So we're really just catching up."

Ms. da Fonseca-Wollheim is a writer living in New York.

Bookshelf / *By Charles Petersen*

Medium of Exchange

Letters are a biographer's best friend—and worst enemy. They are a vivid way of tracking a subject's day-to-day thoughts and activities, but they can also have an up-staging effect. William Faulkner, in a letter to his parents, wrote about a ride on a New York subway: "The experiment showed me that we are not descended from monkeys, as some say, but from lice." No mere biographer's narrative, however conscientious, can compete with such personal confidences.

Yours Ever: People and Their Letters
By Thomas Mallon
(Pantheon, 338 pages, $26.95)

Thomas Mallon, a novelist and literary historian, does not shrink from this challenge and has instead made first-person writing the center of his critical attention. A quarter-century ago, with "A Book of One's Own," he took on that other great "frenemy" of biographers, the diary. Now, with "Yours Ever," his prose aims to illuminate not the juicy self-revelations of diarists but the best that the epistolary genre has to offer. Lord Byron, for instance, on his latest masterpiece: "It may be profligate but is it not life, is it not the thing? Could any man have written it who has not lived in the world?—and fooled in a post-chaise? in a hackney-coach? in a gondola? against a wall? in a court carriage? in a vis-à-vis? on a table? and under it?"

Or Colette, on her preferred style of living: "I have very often deprived myself of the necessities of life, but I have never consented to give up a luxury." And on her idea of luxury: "All I want to do is go on with the unbridled life I lead here: barefoot, my faded bathing suit, an old jacket, lots of garlic, and swimming at all hours of the day."

Reading through "Yours Ever," one can't help compiling one's own best-of list. Best Reply, H.L. Mencken, on receipt of a Christmas letter: "Christmas be damned." Best Disappointed Love Letter, George Bernard Shaw: "Infamous, vile, heartless, frivolous, wicked woman! Liar! lying lips, lying eyes, lying hands, promise breaker, cheat, confidence-trickster!" Best Valediction, Marcel Proust: "I was your truly sincere friend." Best Postscript, Theodore Roosevelt: "P.S.—I have just killed a bear." Beat that!

It is to Mr. Mallon's credit that he doesn't try to and presents his book as no more than a "long cover letter" to the "cornucopia" of collected-letters editions listed at the back. For younger readers, for whom putting pen to paper is a quaint and vague notion, "Yours Ever" may also serve as a letter of introduction to the joys of letter writing. Today, Mr. Mallon complains, we rarely see "the kind of considered exchange to which e-mail is . . . doing such chatty, hurry-up violence."

True enough, though it's not hard to imagine many versions of the examples quoted above showing up in email—or, echoing Byron, in instant messages or blog comments, where so much bombast and bragging can now be found. Indeed, one comfort of "Yours Ever" comes from seeing a few of the hallmarks of the electronic age in earlier correspondence. No less a writer than the poet Philip Larkin, it turns out, was a master of all caps, a technique that today's twenty-somethings may have thought they had invented. "The US edition of ["High Windows"] is out, with a photograph of me that cries out for the caption 'FAITH HEALER OR HEARTLESS FRAUD?' "

Old love letters, as Mr. Mallon notes, inevitably leave something to be desired. "Whenever the lovers do manage to get together," he writes, "the letters stop dead." By contrast, a collection of contemporary lovers' correspondence would likely overflow with daily emails and text messages, even if the beloved were a mere five minutes away by cab. This is where Mr. Mallon's argument about the death of "considered" communication finds its greatest force. A young woman sends a sweet photo of herself by cellphone and her boyfriend taps out a quick note to thank her; Héloïse, locked up in a nunnery in the 12th century, looks at her lonely portrait of Abelard and writes: "If a picture, which is but a mute representation of an object, can give such pleasure, what cannot letters inspire? They have souls; they can speak; they have in them all that force which expresses the transports of the heart."

As Mr. Mallon notes, "the small hardships of letter writing—having to think a moment longer before completing utterance; remaining in suspense while awaiting reply; having one's urgent letters cross in the mail—are the things that enrich it, emotionally and rhetorically." If the Internet age has seen the renewal of the written word—email, blog post, text message, "tweet"—it remains true that none of these forms naturally supports the soulful writing of Héloïse or, to take another example, of Keats, whose entire philosophy of life we find in his letters. "Do you not see how necessary a World of Pain and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?" Together with the many amusements of "Yours Ever"—Keats also wrote: "I never intend hereafter to spend any time with Ladies unless they are handsome"—Mr. Mallon's fine book shows how important it is that we take pains to continue writing soulful letters today, whether on paper or in pixels.

Mr. Petersen, an editor for n+1 magazine, lives in Montana.

time off

by William Westbrook

Hiro Ihara/Cai Studio ('Melting Bath'); Conrad Dy-Liacco (Ballet); OC Events (boats)

Above, Taipei: 'Cultural Melting Bath,' by Cai Guo-Qiang; right, Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Ballet dances 'The Way Alone'; below, Hong Kong: Extreme Sailing

Bangkok

FESTIVAL

World Opera Week: One of the week's three works is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony rather than an opera—but it does require a chorus and soloists, in this case the Orpheus Choir and a quartet that includes Nancy Yuen and Israel Lozano. Those two will also pair up in "La Bohème." Work No. 3 will be a brand-new opera, "A Boy and a Tiger," by Bruce Gaston, inspired by Yann Martel's novel "The Life of Pi."

Thailand Cultural Centre, Ratchadaphisek Road, Huay Kwang; Nov. 23, 7:30 p.m. (Beethoven); Nov. 25 and 26, 7:30 p.m. ("Bohème"); Nov. 28 and 29, 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. ("Tiger")
Admission: 100 baht to 1,000 baht (Beethoven); 500 baht to 3,000 baht ("Bohème"); 200 baht to 2,000 baht ("Tiger").
☎ 66-2262-3456
Web: www.thaiticketmajor.com

Beijing

FESTIVAL

Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli International Piano Festival: The Italian version of this festival began in 1964. This first try in Beijing will feature mostly Italian pianists, from the 84-year-old Aldo Ciccolini down to Mauro Bertoli, not yet 30. Two non-Italians will also play, Russian Boris Berezovsky on the 24th and Alexandar Madzarat in the closing concert.

Beijing Concert Hall, 1 Bei Xinhua St., Liubukou, Xicheng District; Nov. 20, 22 to 26 and 29, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: 80 yuan to 880 yuan.
☎ 86-10-6417-7845
Web: www.piao.com.cn

Hong Kong

DANCE

Symphony of Movements: The Hong Kong Ballet in a triple bill—"The Kingdom of the Shades" from the 19th-century classic "La Bayadère," choreographed by Marius Petipa to the music of Ludwig Minkus; "The Way Alone," created for the company by Stephen Baynes and set to a Tchaikovsky mix; and Nils Christe's setting of Stravinsky's "Symphony in 3 Movements."

Hong Kong Cultural Centre, 10 Salisbury Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon; Nov. 20, 2:30 p.m.; Nov. 21, 2:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Nov. 22, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: HK$120 to HK$1,000.
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

Seoul

CONCERT

Ana Vidovic: The 29-year-old Croatian virtuoso guitarist had her concert debut more than 20 years ago, and her first international performance at age 11. This concert will include works by Takemitsu, Piazzolla and Rodrigo. It's the start of a five-recital trip through South Korea, with stops in Osan, Anyang, Daegu and Busan.

Sejong Center, 81-3 Sejong-no, Jongno-gu; Nov. 28, 2 p.m.
Admission: 35,000 won.
☎ 82-2-585-2934
Web: www.sejongpac.or.kr

Taipei

EXHIBITION

Cai Guo-Qiang—Hanging Out in the Museum: The Chinese artist exploded onto the international art stage in the 1980s, and not just metaphorically—his works include gunpowder drawings and explosion videos. This, his first retrospective in Taiwan, includes these as well as large-scale installations, plus early works and a new one made especially for this exhibition.

Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 181 Zhong Shan North Rd., Section 3; until Feb. 28, 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., to 8:30 p.m. Saturdays; closed Mondays.
Admission: NT$30.
☎ 886-2-2595-7656
Web: www.tfam.museum

Tour: Asia

SPORTS

Extreme Sailing: The "Extreme 40" catamarans are made using construction methods similar to those that create Formula One cars, and while they don't go quite as fast, they can reach 65 kilometers an hour with only the wind propelling them. In Hong Kong, the public can watch the racing from many points around the harbor; on the 22nd, the boats will participate in the Hong Kong Yacht Club's "Around the Island" race.

Hong Kong: Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club, Kellett Island, Causeway Bay; Nov. 20, 23 and 24, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; Nov. 21, 10 a.m. to noon; Nov. 22, 9:40 a.m. start.
Free admission.
☎ 852-9279-8217
Singapore: Marina Barrage, Marina Way; Dec. 11 to 15, times not yet determined.
Free admission.
Web: www.extremesailingseriesasia.com

CONCERT

Earth, Wind & Fire: The harmonizing R&B hit machine from the 1970s (90 million albums sold, 10 Grammy awards) still includes some original members—Verdine White, founder Maurice White's brother, on the bass, along with Philip Bailey (famous for his falsetto) and vocalist/percussionist Ralph Johnson. The tour also will stop in Osaka, Tokyo, Sapporo and Seoul.

Singapore: Singapore Indoor Stadium, 2 Stadium Walk; Dec. 1, 8 p.m.
Admission: S$75 to S$275.
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.sistic.com
Kuala Lumpur: Sunway Lagoon, 3 Jalan PJS 11/11, Bandar Sunway, Petaling Jaya; Dec. 3, 8 p.m.
Admission: 158 ringgit to 888 ringgit.
☎ 60-3-7711-5000
Web: www.axcess.com.my
Manila: Reception Hall, Philippine International Convention Center, CCP Complex, Roxas Boulevard; Dec. 5, 8 p.m.
Admission: 2,500 pesos to 8,000 pesos.
☎ 63-2-891-9999
Web: www.ticketworld.com.ph

Tour: Japan

CONCERT

Czech Philharmonic Orchestra: Two of the three programs on this tour feature symphonies by the Czech Antonín Dvorák, the eighth (paired with the Brahms first) and the ninth (the "New World," paired with the Beethoven sixth). Other stops include Iwakuni and Nagoya; there are also two concerts at other Tokyo venues.

Tokyo: Tokyo Opera City, 3-20-2 Nishi-Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku; Nov. 20, 7 p.m.
Admission: 5,000 yen to 25,000 yen.
☎ 81-3-3588-0737
Web: www.operacity.jp
Tokyo: Suntory Music Hall, Akasaka 1-13-1, Minato-ku; Nov. 23, 7 p.m.
Admission: 5,000 yen to 25,000 yen.
☎ 81-3-3584-9999
Web: www.suntory.co.jp/suntoryhall